

games as a source for database marketing. The group plans to release a driving game called *HumanLimit* for free, tempting players with the promise of a \$1 million prize.<sup>15</sup> FPP would collect registrations for future marketing as well as sell ad space in the game's urban environment through a system much like Massive's. Once again, we have an example of a game striving for results through immediate, numerical evidence.

Other games attempt to account for their success through psychological or physiological metrics. Consider the educational/healthcare game *EyeSpy: The Matrix*, a conditioning game for self-esteem.<sup>16</sup> In the game, players are presented with a 4 × 4 grid of faces. One face in the grid is smiling; the rest frown or scowl. The player is instructed to click on the "smiling/accepting" face as quickly as possible. The researchers who developed the game conducted interviews and measurements with a control group and with players of the game and published research claiming that self-esteem can be enhanced via the randomized, smiling faces of *The Matrix*.<sup>17</sup> The game, they argue, produces implicit self-esteem merely through exposure to the smiling faces. And Red Octane's pro-*DDR* campaign claims that Tanya Jessen lost ninety-five pounds using the game as her only means of exercise.<sup>18</sup>

In serious games, performance is always assumed to correlate with numerical progress, and numerical progress is often tied directly or indirectly to the accrual of or reduction in capital. Furthermore, such a performance assessment is usually assumed to bear interest very rapidly, perhaps even immediately after a session of the game is completed. The institutions that fund and use serious games—the military, government, educational institutions, healthcare institutions, and corporations—impose such demands. For these institutions, persuasion implies the production of assent as rapidly as possible. But as I have argued, procedural rhetorics can also challenge the situations that contain them, exposing the logic of their operations and opening the possibility for new configurations. Accounting for such results is impossible from within the framework of the system a procedural rhetoric hopes to question; the currency of such a system is no longer valid. If we want to know how persuasive games persuade, we need to find another model.

### Deliberation

When we created *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, the campaign stood at the peak of its success using grassroots outreach. Convinced that all their work

could drive registrations, contributions, and further commitments to volunteer, the campaign asked us to include links to such activities in the game itself. These links registered click-throughs to a metrics server, which the campaign used to track the performance of a variety of campaigns. When I talk to the press about political games like *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* or *Disaffected!*, they inevitably ask how many people played the game, or how long they played, or if we correlated gameplay with registrations or contributions. They are hoping for information like that stored by the metrics server. But the most interesting results the game produced had nothing to do with the number of plays, clicks from the game to the website, or contributions generated. Rather, those came from conversations about the game's procedural rhetoric itself.

In chapter 4, I argued that digital democracy has failed to represent political issues through computation, favoring encyclopedic artifacts like blogs over procedural ones like videogames. Videogames facilitate player consideration of rule-based systems, but blogs facilitate open discussion. Conveniently, Dean's campaign unfolded the same year weblogs came into their own as a popular medium, and we were fortunate to be able to watch players unpack their experiences with the games in both mass media publications and blogs. Responses were mixed, from "Half-assed mind-control experiment"<sup>19</sup> to "I have yet to decide if it's creative or creepy"<sup>20</sup> to "it is too incredible for words to describe."<sup>21</sup> These qualitative responses were both endearing and amusing, even the harshly negative ones. The more significant responses attempted to understand our procedural representation of grassroots outreach in the context of the broader campaign.

While many bloggers weighed in on their love, hate, or ambivalence for the game, others interrogated its rules and attempted to relate those rules to the meaning of the campaign. Wrote critic Justin Hall, "It's the arcade/action side of a real-time strategy game, resource gathering through fast clicking. But there's no resulting overview, no political resource allocation game."<sup>22</sup> Game journalist David Thomas took Hall's observation further in his own review.

The score in the game is simple—the more people you recruit to the Dean side, the better. . . . You recruit, and while you do it, you get little pro-Dean messages flashing around the corners or your screen. . . .

And in a few cute minutes of play with a simple set of games, politics is revealed for what it is—a raw game of numbers. The Dean game shows that his campaign is no different than Bush's. No different than any other in recent memory. The political process has been hijacked by analysis and planners looking at demographic data and figuring out how to build landslides of word-of-mouth influence.

What Dean says doesn't matter in this game, nor in the real world. It's simply the calculus of mobilization. Get enough waves of volunteers recruiting volunteers and you have the perfect Amway pyramid—multi-level marketing your way to the presidency.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike many of the comments we tracked, Thomas's criticism ceases to traverse the game's surface and begins to interrogate the meaning of its rules. Politics, argues *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, is a numbers game. Like advertising, like education, like the very notion of assessment addressed above, the game privileges warm bodies over public policy. In such a scenario, political action is postponed. Hall makes an apology for the strategy, noting its credibility as a campaign strategy: "*The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* does remind us that the political process is made up of rote tasks performed by dedicated followers—the earlier in the process the better. So as a political education project, it is rudimentarily successful—recruit early and often." But Thomas worries that the strategy never ends, the candidate never stops campaigning to begin governing. On the one hand, Thomas's critique attacks the Dean campaign in particular; its focus on grassroots outreach and recruitment overwhelmed any semblance of discourse about the candidate's political issues. His progressive supporters overran Dean's record as a moderate in the small, rural state of Vermont. The image of Dean as a rural centrist with a commitment to public and social works was replaced by one of his coastal, urban followers: the latte-swilling, Volvo-driving leftists whose aggregate political persona replaced that of Dean. On the other hand, Thomas's appraisal suggests that it is not just Dean for whom amassing human wealth has replaced policy, but all politicians. Thomas continues, "the Dean for Iowa game tells us everything we need to know about the campaign. It's about votes, not about issues. It's about recruitment, not about people. It's about building momentum, not about being right."<sup>24</sup> Such is the procedural rhetoric of politics: one amasses supporters in support of nothing more than support itself. Political justice becomes, in Alain Badiou's words, "the harmonization of the interplay of interests."<sup>25</sup>

How might we measure David Thomas's interesting reading of the rhetoric of *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*? Again the imps of numerical proof rear their horned heads. We might consider the influence of Thomas's syndicated newspaper column. We might count the readers on Thomas's buzzcut.com website, where the article was originally published. Perhaps we might count the number of replies in the comment thread attached to the article, or perhaps even the number of unique voices in that thread. Or, Google-like, we might count the inbound links, taking reference as a measure of value. But such measures impose the very criticism Thomas mounts against politics upon his own reading: issues, debate, and consideration are dismissed in favor of symbolic wealth.

The real promise of Thomas's response to the game's argument would come from discursive, not numerical analysis. What do he and his readers do with this new perspective on Dean's campaign, or on campaigns in general? Do they abandon all pretense of faith in the democratic process? Do they move for revolution? Do they challenge the candidate to forgo abstraction in favor of policy? And moreover, is this type of response a success or a failure in persuasion?

The persuasive goal of *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, we should remember, was to motivate fencesitter supporters to participate in the campaign. Thomas himself seems to self-identify as one such target: "I, like a lot of other people, have been thinking maybe Howard Dean wouldn't be such a bad guy to be president. The 'fighting centrist' acts like he just wants to do the right thing. And in American politics, that's a rare and possibly mythical beast."<sup>26</sup> If the only type of support valid for persuasion is the contribution of money or volunteer time, then certainly Thomas was not persuaded. But if increasingly sophisticated interrogation of the candidate and the campaign offers sufficient evidence of a progression from curious, possible supporter to inquisitive, prospective supporter, we need not consider the videogame a persuasive failure. Rather than producing assent, which can be measured with a yea or nay, the game produces deliberation, which implies neither immediate assent nor dissent.

There are precedents for styles of rhetoric that muster deliberation as evidence of persuasion. Modes of Judeo-Christian rhetoric outside of missionary sermon are less easily compared to the classical modes of evidence. Old Testament covenant speech follows a fixed pattern: "first, to strengthen the authority of the Lord by reminding the audience of what he has done; second,